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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4257
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RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 0171

C O N F I D E N T I A L HAVANA 000178

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2019
TAGS: [CU](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#)
SUBJECT: MOUNTING GOC PRESSURE ON CIVIL SOCIETY

REF: A. HAVANA 150
[1](#)B. HAVANA 153
[1](#)C. 2008 HAVANA 835

Classified By: COM Jonathan Farrar for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Concurrent with changes in leadership (reftels) the GOC appears to be tightening its ongoing crack down on dissident and other civil society activity. Traditional opposition groups, an emerging civil society leader, and LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transvestite) activists have all reported increased harassment from MinInt and law enforcement agents. Tactics have included: arrests, short-term detentions, interrogations, threats, travel prohibitions, and general physical and psychological intimidation. Reports from civil society members have been widespread and consistent, but no unifying theory has emerged to explain the rise of this new wave of repression.

Traditional Opposition Groups

[1](#)2. (C) The Damas de Blanco (or "Ladies in White") and their supporters report that they have been the victims of overt repression as they organize six days of activities from March 17-22, memorializing the sixth anniversary of the "Black Spring," (i.e., the 2003 GOC crackdown on dissidents). MinInt agents or local police have detained various members of the group in order to prevent their participation in Damas meetings and activities; other members have been unable to attend events because their houses were surrounded by MinInt agents. Before their usual Sunday activities on March 8, 2009 (the same day the official Federation of Cuban Women concluded its national congress in preparation for the proposed Communist Party congress later this year), two Damas supporters were detained and three were prevented from leaving their houses by the presence of MinInt agents outside their doors; another was detained when she returned home that afternoon following the Damas activities. One Dama has been arbitrarily detained three times in the past month for anywhere from a few hours to an entire day; another was detained briefly and threatened with 6-20 years of imprisonment if she continues to support the Damas; a third active supporter and prominent independent journalist was ordered to appear at her neighborhood tribunal court on March 20th, in order, she believes, to weaken the Damas' numbers during their week of activities.

[1](#)3. (C) One of the leading Damas, Laura Pollan, dates the current wave of repression back to mid-February, when fifteen Damas gathered in peaceful protest outside the hospital where a prominent political prisoner was receiving treatment, and were quickly gathered up by police and shoved into a police van. Pollan noted that State pressure on the Damas has not only increased, but has also become more physically abusive,

with numerous Damas having been shoved or manhandled while being taken into custody or rounded up. She had also heard reports that the GOC has been preparing the women and the youth of the Communist Party to engage in "actos de repudio" against the Damas during their various events this week.

¶4. (U) Martha Beatriz Roque Cabello has produced two press releases in the past week citing similar pressure on members of the opposition umbrella organization Agenda para la Transición, as the group led up to a major meeting on Wednesday, March 11, 2009. At least eight Agenda members were detained throughout three provinces and prevented from attending the Agenda meeting; State Security also prevented at least five others from attending the meeting by surrounding the meeting site. One, a member of the Coordinating Board, was "reminded" by State Security that he was out of jail on conditional parole and could be sent back to prison for attending.

¶5. (C) The above typify the types of repression being reported to USINT from numerous opposition group members. Detentions have generally lasted anywhere from a few hours to a day, and have included seemingly low-level interrogations about opposition activities as well as mild physical abuse (manhandling, etc.). Detainees have been threatened with long-term incarceration, and told that if they continue to support opposition groups, their family members will also suffer adverse consequences at work or in school.

Civil Society Leaders

¶6. (C) Lilvio Fernandez Luis, an emerging dissident leader, was arrested and held at Villa Marista (MinInt's detention center) for approximately 44 hours in early March. President of the Comisión Mariana de Atencin al Presidio Político en Cuba, Fernandez focuses on raising awareness of political prisoners and providing them and their families aid such as clothing, books and medicine. (Note: While Fernandez has personal connections to the opposition leadership, he operates outside the traditional opposition orbit politically.)

¶7. (C) Although MinInt informed Fernandez that he was being arrested for having accepted and distributed written materials from a Miami exile group, he was detained just two hours after hosting a Comisión meeting at his house that brought together former prisoners, family members of current political prisoners, and two USINT officials. Fernandez was held in solitary confinement in a freezing room for almost two days and was not allowed to sleep; he was interrogated 12 times about his work, his contacts with the international community, and his connection to the USINT in particular. His wife received hourly phone calls from a mysterious woman inquiring as to his whereabouts, leading her to suspect him of having an affair. Fernandez was offered numerous incentives to become a mole for MinInt and claims to have rejected each offer. He was told that if he continued his work, he would be given a lengthy jail sentence.

¶8. (C) Independent journalists have also been targeted for short-term detentions over the past two months. Five journalists were detained on January 15th in conjunction with the USINT graduation ceremony marking completion of their training course with Florida International University (FIU). A new FIU course has begun and one or more participants routinely are stopped and detained after leaving USINT.

LGBT Activists

¶9. (C) Two homosexual university students and LGBT activists told USINT that in the past month, law enforcement has been targeting the LGBT community more aggressively than normal. Public gatherings of homosexuals are being forcefully disbanded by the police, while heterosexual gatherings in the same park or block are left undisturbed. Police also recently chased three well-known transvestites from "their normal street," eventually catching one of the three, who was apparently beaten badly while in police

custody. The activists noted that while discrimination against the LGBT community is common in Cuba, law enforcement has seemed demonstrably more hostile towards the community in the past month.

¶10. (C) COMMENT: The practices described above are common MinInt or law enforcement tactics when dealing with all of civil society, and the GOC has been pursuing them more actively since the fall 2008 hurricanes. However our contacts are reporting even more intense application of repressive measures in the last few weeks. Authorities are intimidating and harassing not only leaders but also minor participants in opposition movements, while simultaneously targeting marginalized but apolitical social groups. This strategy seems to reflect a current GOC preference for destabilizing opposition or other "dissident" movements through broad, low-level repression tactics that maximize operational benefits while minimizing international political costs.

¶11. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: All the civil society members we have spoken to say that the past month brought a particularly harsh crackdown, which has intensified in the past two weeks. Notably, most civil society members claim that the crackdown is a result of the GOC being "scared" (note: to be exact, nearly all use the phrase "tiene miedo")) although the theories as to why the GOC is "scared" vary. Some say that, between the election of President Obama and the promises of change made by President Raul Castro, average Cubans had heightened expectations for improvements to daily life that have now been dashed, breeding resentment within a disenchanted and increasingly poor populace. Others say that President Raul Castro is "militarizing" all aspects of society in order to compensate for his lack of popular support and the threat of popular dissent. Laura Pollan said that the State was cracking down on the Damas in particular because they are the most visible dissident group on the international stage. The LGBT activists said that the State was cracking down on "everything" in order to divert popular speculation away from the cabinet shake-up and direct it toward more personal problems like the break-up of a social event, or a friend's detention.

¶12. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: The current crackdown could also be explained away simply. The Damas are on the eve of a well-publicized six day event which will suffer if their numbers are diminished; Agenda para la Transicion had made gains in unifying numerous opposition groups and held a large meeting in an attempt to solidify those gains; Lilvio Fernandez Luis has had increasing contact with the USINT and had just held a large, successful meeting at his house; the LGBT community is often harassed, and that harassment has traditionally come in waves. Unsurprisingly, the true reasons behind this crackdown remain a conundrum.

FARRAR